

TJ Blog by Stuart Walkley

Stuck behind the carthorse

Recently there has been a re-run of *Steptoe and Son* on Radio 4 Extra. Nowadays these seem like the auditory equivalent of sepia Victorian photographs in heavy wooden frames, but really they are both priceless and timeless. Poor Harold, returns home weary and disillusioned from his work as a Rag and Bone man (how grand he would be now as a reclamation consultant) thoroughly fed up with life in general and his career in particular. “All I do, is sit watching the backside of the horse going, up and down, up and down, up and down”. As you might expect things stay that way.

I was remembering this as my mind wandered during a couple of recent coaching engagements. Oh, I know I should be in the moment, focused entirely on what is being said, and I promise you I was listening intently, but what I was seeing in my distracted mind’s eye was Harold sat on his cart, watching the backside of his horse. This visioning approach is beginning to reach me.

In front of me was a bright, slightly edgy, presumptuous and talented guy frustrated by the lack of challenge in his job, peeved that he seldom seemed to be allowed to make any real decisions, and stuck behind a manager who was kind, facilitative and encouraging but who nonetheless was straight in front of him blocking his view and slowing down his inexorable rise to fame and glory. Our modern-day Harold was every bit as weary, fed-up, and stuck behind a cart-horse in terms of his career.

When faced with such a situation there are only two things to do, “lump it or leave it”. There is no question of “liking it” for there is nothing to like and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. So let’s explore those two options, “lump it or leave it”.

“Lump it” because we may all have make career choices based on our personal circumstances and predisposition. It may be the option we choose or feel compelled to take. We can feel frustrated, irritated, blocked but it may be that we choose to stay behind, following the carthorse and get into the “up and down, up and down, up and down” rhythmic plod.

That's absolutely fine. It might well be the right decision and as coaches whilst we might like to challenge, reframe, explore options, and in every way hold decisions up to the light for inspection we can and must respect individual choices. Learning to "lump it" may not always be such a bad thing. The expectations that we can always be happy, have what we want, fulfil every ambition and realise every dream is pure nonsense. "Well, lump it them" may well be an inner voice acceptance.

But if we are not prepared to lump it then we and only we have to do something about it. Grumbling about things, in the tragi-comic way of Harold Steptoe, achieves nothing. We stay in the same place, doing the same things, thinking the same thoughts and feeling the same emotions. Again, digging back into my adolescence and early adulthood, it is the futile fatalism of Pinter's *The Caretaker*, or Becket's *Waiting for Godot*. Now here is where Coaching becomes truly interesting. For faced with someone who no longer wants to "lump it" we have to enable them to "leave it". It is not our decision, of course, but if coaching does anything it helps people to allow that inner voice to find expression and to guide subsequent action.

It's a big step, a risk as well as an adventure. Too often we talk of coaching as "de-risking" leadership or managerial decisions but for me it is all about challenging people to take risks, or at least to contemplate taking risks. In the end the decision has to be theirs, of course. Now this particular story had a positive outcome. Through the coaching experience our new age Harold realised that he no longer wanted to follow the carthorse. He gathered up his courage and took the decision to leave. Actually we talked very little about it, the inner dialogue was more important and most of all the decision or compulsion to act which really did "dawn on him". Once made, things moved quickly. Brave in the current world of work where safety first suggests "lump it" as the preferred option, but for our ambitious and edgy young talent precisely the right thing to do.

I saw him recently and had lunch together in one of those London roof-top restaurants that always remind me of "Chim chiminey, Chim chiminey, Chim chim cher-ee!". (My mind is wandering again). He was loving the challenge and speed of the new job, the breathless demands being made of him. He was liking being "overworked" and most of all the open road in front of him.



Now, he may well be caught out speeding, he could even crash, or he may just get somewhere. But at least he is no longer stuck behind the carthorse.

Now that, to my mind, is a visualisation of what career coaching is all about.

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